DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 304 900 FL 017 857

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TITLE Ethical Considerations in Designing the International Business Communication Course.
PUB DATE Apr 88
NOTE 13p.; In: Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages for Business and the Professions (see FL 017 839).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Administration Education; *Business Communication; Course Descriptions; *Ethics; Higher Education; International Trade
IDENTIFIERS *Ethical Relativity

ABSTRACT

As awareness of the need for ethical business behavior increases, businesspeople must address the issue of an ethical standard acceptable for use in international business or, in individual situations, which country's ethical standards will be respected. Ethical absolutes cannot be determined without cultural bias. Legalistic, religious, and situational frameworks all reflect existing prejudices and values. Legalistic ethics occur most commonly in low-context cultures that place great value on the written word. High-context cultures tend to favor a situational approach to ethics. Religious ethics are determined by the individual religion to which one adheres. In each of these cases, culture divides the ground for a universal ethical standard. In international business, the question arises: at what point should one reject the norms and values of one's own culture to accommodate those of another? The most practical approach to the international businessman is ethical relativity, a willingness to modify one's own ethical views to communicate effectively across cultures. However, ethical relativism in international business does not address the situation in which a society condemns people based on an immutable characteristic such as gender or race. Businesspeople should be encouraged to accept and work with cultural differences but adhere to individual ethics. (MSE)

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In proceedings of the Seventh Annual Eastern Michigan University conference on Languages for Business and the Professions.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN DESIGNING THE INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION COURSE

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN DESIGNING THE INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION COURSE

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This paper addresses a major concern in the design of the international business communications course: the role which ethics should play in such a course. The observations made in this paper are drawn in large part from the personal experience of the author in designing and subsequently teaching over three years the international business communication course taught in the Department of Management of Eastern Michigan University's College of Business. This course, whose design was funded in part by a Title VIA grant from the U.S. Department of Education, was among the first international business communication courses on an undergraduate level in a business college in the United States. Indeed, the difficulties in determining an answer to the question of what role ethics should play in such a course were somewhat exacerbated by the fact that the course at the time of its creation was such a rarity in most colleges of business.

In recent times a great deal of attention has been given to the the part ethics play in the business world and consequently in business education. In the United States in particular, society has imposed increasingly greater demands on its business community. Within 100 years, the standard of business ethics has shifted from the era of the so-called "robber barons" to one in

which the businessperson is expected to actively help solve such basic national ills as race discrimination, poverty, pollution and sexism.

Admittedly, much of what the business community has done to solve these fundamental societal problems has taken place precisely because local, state and national governmental bodies have passed laws forcing companies and firms to comply. Nevertheless, those who run these same firms and companies have increasingly come to grapple with issues that have a clear ethical component. Business is no longer expected merely to meet society's economic needs. Even if only out of fear of future legislation forcing compliance, companies and firms are expected to choose what can be seen in ethical terms as that which is right or good by society's standards.

However, as the awareness of the need for ethical business behavior is increasing, businesspeople most begin to grapple with the philosophical issue of defining ethics. The author of this paper makes no attempt to define ethics or even to lay out an ethical standard universally acceptable for business in all cultures. That, if it is even possible at all, would be the task of philosophers and sociologists. However, it is hoped that the issue is raised for the reader of the extreme difficulty if not the impossibility of determining an ethical standard acceptable for use in international business.

Ethics for business are difficult enough to determine within a single domestic situation. Within the United States, at

least, evidence exists that seems to indicate businesspeople have no single source from which to draw their ethics. Indeed, Raymond Baumhart (1968) cites a survey of U.S. businesspeople indicated that ethics was largely a subjective and personal matter. In this survey, 50 percent of the respondents indicated that they defined the word ethical to mean "what my feelings tell me is right" (p. 10).

Before we continue, then, perhaps it is necessary to define what is meant by ethics. For our purposes, we may define ethics as the assessment of of good and bad or of right and wrong. Business ethics refers to using judgements of good and bad or right and wrong to determine appropriate business behavior rather than merely relying on management or accounting principles and marketing strategies.

In international business, however, companies and firms face a problem beyond merely determining the right course of action according to society's standards. In an international framework, the question arises as to which society the businessperson selects as the one whose standards of right and wrong he or she must base his ethics. When the standards of right and wrong vary between the two cultures the businessperson must decide which culture's standards are the appropriate ethical standards.

Significantly, it is almost impossible to determine ethical absolutes in the absence of culturally biased guidelines. It is common, for example, possible to determine ethics based on a

legalistic, religious or situational foundation. However all of these groundworks on which the superstructure of ethical behavior may be built are laid out acccording to the existing prejudices and values of the individual cultures which rely on them.

Those people whose ethics are determined legalistically are likely to belong to what Edward Hall (1959, 1983) refers to as low context cultures -- cultures such as the United States or Northern Europe which lay great value on the written word. In such cultures, heavy reliance on written rules and codification of behavior into law make right and wrong fairly straightforward. Moreover, because respect for legalism as a system of behavior exists, such laws act as directives that demand compliance rather than guidelines to be taken or ignored as the situation demands.

However, the codes and statutes of each culture vary. Even were those low context cultures which through tradition or religious leanings to agree on a set of common principles to set into law -- itself an extremely unlikely supposition -- their cultural bias toward the sacredness of laws and rules would not be shared by many other cultures. These high context cultures are more likely to believe that adherence to rules depends largely on the context in which the rules are set. Thus, a businessperson from a low context culture is likely to feel strongly bound by a written contract, even if the contract were signed under duress. In short, it would be unethical to break from the agreement described in the contract. By contrast, in a high context culture, breaking the contract might not seem unethical in certain

situations. For example, if the contract were signed under duress, could be seen as invalid. What matters most in such a culture is the relationship between people. Conversely, if no contract were signed between a buyer and supplier with a longstanding good relationship, the buyer of a low context culture would feel little ethical obligation to continue buying from the supplier if a less expensive supplier could be found. The high context buyer, by contrast, would find such a break in the relationship to be ethically troubling since it is the relationship and not the written contract or law that binds the two together.

The members of a high context culture tend to favor a situational approach to ethics. While not exactly believing in antimonianism or existentialism, some cultures are more likely than others to approach every situation as unique. Human behavior defies codification; laws and strict rules are therefore of little specific value when dealing with specific ethical situations rather than general principles. To assess the ethical, that is the right, course of action using a situational approach, one must assess all of the factors unique to the individual situation. For such cultures, ethics are relative. Ethical decisions are thus reached on an ad hoc basis.

As for using religious grounds to determine ethical standards, the obvious question arises as to which religion's ethics one chooses to follow. Divine revelation as a justification for action for many religions negates the

possiblility of divine revelation as a source of action for those holding different religious beliefs.

Even in the three situations described above, great cultural chasms divide the ground for a universal ethical standard. And these three situations do not even take into account such relatively univeral philosophical differences of teleoligical or deontological ethical approaches within whatever system is culturally acceptable.

We thus see that no easy answer occurs to the question of what ethics are. This raises the next question, that which is the subject of this paper: what does the instructor of a course in international business communication teach as the appropriate ethical standard to use. Since any system of ethics is likely to be culturally biased, different cultures will hold different ethical standards. However, each culture's standards are equally valid as long as they remain within the culture that accepts them. Since international business brings those people holding these differing standards together, it is no longer possible to accept both standards equally.

The question then arises as to what point one rejects the norms and values of one's own culture to accommodate the conflicting norms and values of another culture. To some extent this question can be answered by the usual admonitions of such cross-cultural experts as Sitaram and Cogdell (1976), Ruben (1987) and Singer (1987) for the need to be flexible in one's views of right and wrong in international situations. For these authors

as well as many others, in the absence of a metaethic, an open-minded willingness to modify or alter one's own ethical views is the only acceptable approach to communicating across cultures.

To a large extent, this ethical approach of ethical relativity is arguably the most practical one available to the international businessperson. A society which works on Sundays and conducts a brisk trade in the production of wooden idols may seem to be condemned to damnation in the life hereafter to a fundamentalist Christian. However, if that fundamentalist Christian wishes to compete at maximum efficiency in selling wood to that country, he or she would do best to sell on Sunday and pass no restrictions on the use of the wood. If these compromises in the Christian's ethics are too great, the most appropriate course would be to withdraw from that foreign market. Of course, compromises are possible on both sides of the cultural barrier. Such an all or nothing approach need not be the only option. Perhaps the foreign culture would agree to accept the Christian's ban on Sunday work if the Christian withheld condemnation on the sin of idol-worship and so forth.

However, the proponents of ethical relativism in international business fail to address one particularly significant issue. How does the businessperson address those ethical issues that run up against an immutable characteristic. When the norms and values of a society condemn people based on gender or on race how should one from a culture with a conflicting view of the immutable characteristic behave?

To some extent, ethical relativism could still apply. When neither party has such an immutable characteristic, for example, either party can alter their view toward condemning or accepting those with the characteristic in question. However, since one cannot change one's gender or race (or to a lesser extent one's political party or religion) The degree to which the traditional advice of flexibility in handling cross-cultural differences applies in such instances becomes unclear.

No easy solution to this question exists. In such instances, the cross-cultural communicator enters what Dean Barnlund (1982) has called "an ethical void". Since all ethics are culturally derived and no particular set of ethics can in any objective and truly multicultural way be considered better than any other, the businessperson in an increasingly global world economy must determine what is right or wrong with very little guidance. As Barnlund has observed, "the cross-cultural encounter is protected by no standards of ethical adequacy." (p. 379).

The need to be flexible in cross-cultural business relations is extremely important. It is not our intention, in short, to suggest a renewal of cultural intransigency. Indeed, the number of businesspeople who weaken their position in the global marketplace through cultural myopia is at once large and needless, as Ricks et al. (1974) among others have amply documented. Businesspeople should be encouraged to accept and work with differences in such matters as language, time perception, nonverbal behavior, technology, and in most cases even social organization, and authority conception. Inflexibility toward

cross-cultural differences of these sort can and should be discouraged.

Yet even as we encourage cross-cultural flexibility for many -- even most-- issues, we should be wary of finding points of accommodation on all areas of cross-cultural differences.

Where we choose to draw the line is one of individual ethics, which is in itself culturally determined. It is suggested that it is necessary to draw that line in cases affecting immutable characteristics, that is discrimination on the basis of such characteristics as gender, race and religion.

This choice is, at least, one the guideline used by this author in teaching the international business communication course at one university. Admittedly, this is in itself a culturally biased choice influenced by what is a distinctly North American ethical framework. For those from other cultures, the choice they make may well vary to reflect their own societal standards. This is as it should be. In accommodating other behavioral standards in cross-cultural communication, the businessperson must retain the understanding that inevitably he or she inextricably remains a part of his or her own culture.

While variations across culture in general should be viewed not as wrong but simply as different, we risk hiding sophistry under the guise of multiculturalism without some ethical standard. This article offers but one standard, determined by its author's own cultural milieu for use in an international business

communication course taught within that cultural milieu.

The purpose of the article, however, is not to suggest that all cross-cultural communicators adopt this standard. Instead, it is suggested simply that the adoption of some standard -- any standard-- not be condemned out of hand in discussions of cross-cultural business communication. As we enter an increasingly globalized world economy, the need for some supracultural ethical standard is growing. While the form this ethic might take is not clear one possible ethic might be to provide the boundaries within which cross-cultural interaction can take place in a manner most likely to create respect for all people, regardless of immutable characteristics. This suggestion is but a starting point for discussions of a more comprehensive standard. It is at the least a call to consider a means by which to fill the ethical void created by unquestioning acceptance of cross-cultural differences, and to curb the abuses allowed by the absence of any standard in cross-cultural business dealings.

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